

The Relationship Between Leader Experience and Team Performance in Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Designs

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Leadership is a popular topic in the academic sport management literature (Chelladurai, 1990; Soucie, 1994) as well as in the popular press (Adler, 2003). Unfortunately, there is very little evidence that the academic literature is being used or can be used by sport organizations. A very common and important task for most organizations is the selection of leaders. Practitioners, however, would be hard-pressed to find practical evidence-based advice about this topic. With respect to stable leader characteristics, the academic sport management literature primarily focuses on the role of gender and race and organizations' failure to integrate leadership positions (Cunningham, Bruening, & Straub, 2006). This failure, however, may be the result of a lack of evidence about alternative valid selection techniques. Without any other evidence, organizations may have no other option than to rely on "common sense" selection. Common sense selection can be seen when organizations select leaders with a history of success, leaders with many years of experience, or someone already well-known or well-connected to an organization. Such techniques can obviously exclude individuals (or groups of individuals) without experience or social networks. A key question that has not been fully explored in the sport management literature is: To what extent does leader experience predict team performance?

The work experience construct has a long and important role in management research and practice. Among other roles, experience is used as a selection tool, as a compensable factor, as a promotion consideration, and as a means for selecting layoff survivors. Only recently, however, has this construct received careful theoretical scrutiny (Quinones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995). Recent theoretical developments suggest that experience can be conceptualized along several dimensions. Quinones et al. (1995) argue that experience can be classified according to measurement mode (i.e., time, amount, or type) and level of specificity (e.g., task, job, or organization). Most commonly, experience is conceptualized in terms of time (e.g., years of experience); but experience may also be conceptualized as the number of times some task has been performed (e.g., number of playoff games managed). This latter conceptualization may be particularly useful in sport management research where the lengths of seasons may vary across sports and leagues. Finally, the type of experience may be conceptualized more qualitatively. Experience coaching a very talented team, for example, may be fundamentally different than coaching a less talented team.

Any measurement mode mentioned above could be applied to different levels of specificity. Time, for example, could be measured at the career level (e.g., years of experience across a career), at the organizational level (e.g., years of experience with a particular organization), or at the job level (e.g., years of experience as an assistant coach vs. years of experience as a head coach). Given the wide variety of ways in which experience can be operationalized, it becomes obvious that comprehensive studies of the relationship between experience and team performance have not been done. When such studies are done, we may find that certain types of experience are more valuable than others. From a labor economics viewpoint, we might also find that organizations are overpaying for types of experience with little value.

Within the sport management literature and in the broader human resource management literature, most studies of the experience-performance link are cross-sectional in nature (e.g., Avery, Tonidandel, Griffith, & Quinones, 2003). This fact is especially problematic in the study of experience because the proposed relationship is inherently longitudinal (i.e., leaders change over time). Suppose that a cross-sectional study reveals a significant correlation between leader years of experience and team performance. This finding is most likely to be interpreted as implying that leaders improve over time. An alternative interpretation, however, may be that inherently good leaders are allowed to stay (and gain years of experience) whereas poor leaders are weeded out early in their careers. The latter interpretation would imply that experience, per se, is not particularly valuable. Therefore, organizations might benefit if they could identify "good" leaders with no experience.

A final interpretation of a significant positive relationship between experience and performance is derived from the intriguing notion that leadership matters very little (Lieberson & O'Connor, 1972). Suppose that team performance is completely determined by team talent and the leader has no influence. Leaders who happen to end up on good teams would receive some of the credit for the teams' success and would be allowed to stay longer than leaders who happen to end up on poor teams. If this were true, organizations would be unwise to pay significantly higher salaries to attract leaders who only appear to have a significant impact on their teams.

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The primary purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between leader experience and team performance. Leader experience is conceptualized multidimensionally in terms of measurement mode and in terms of level of specificity. This study will make a substantive contribution to the literature by examining which types of experience (and at what levels) are the best predictors of team performance and the most valuable to organizations. This study will also make a methodological contribution by illustrating the value of hierarchical modeling in the study of longitudinal processes (Todd, Crook, & Barilla, 2005).

Data for this study were extracted from public databases of professional baseball and professional basketball statistics. Relationships between different types of experience and different levels of specificity will be presented along with practical implications for the selection of leaders.

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